

Bellevue targets Latinos with advice on college

By Rachel Tuinstra

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Financial aid, scholarships and college applications — it was befuddling to Sergio Rodriguez, who had recently emigrated from Mexico.

Last year Rodriguez attended the first Latino Student Leadership Conference hosted by the Bellevue School District to encourage Latino students to think about their future.

Now an 18-year-old freshman at the University of Washington, he came back to volunteer at this year's conference.

"It helps lead you in the right direction," said Rodriguez, who immigrated here from Mexico with his family when he was a freshman in high school. "They help you figure out where to go, what schools are out there, what your options are. I hope they keep doing this conference for a long time; it's really good."

About 175 students in eighth through 12th grades attended workshops and talked with college representatives Wednesday at Interlake High School. The theme of the conference was *Si Se Puede!*, which is often translated as "Yes, We Can!"

The program started with lunch, followed by keynote speaker Consuelo Castillo Kickbusch, a retired lieutenant colonel in the Army who grew up in a small barrio in Texas. She told students stories about overcoming poverty, illiteracy and discrimination in her own life.

After listening to Kickbusch's talk, some students said they realized how much they, too, wanted to make their families proud.

"I've thought about dropping out," said Leslie Hernandez. "I don't like the work and everything. But I think about my mom and how it would affect her."

Afternoon workshop topics ranged from being a newcomer in America to being successful in high school. Parents and students were invited to a catered dinner in the evening that also featured Kickbusch as a speaker.

Hispanic students make up 8.8 percent of the student enrollment in the Bellevue district, but they made up 24 percent of the district's dropouts in 2005. Last year 74 percent of Latino students completed at least one Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate course, slightly less than the 84 percent of Bellevue students overall.

The district said the conference focused on Latinos as the largest group of minority students who share a language.

"Latino students are the same as everyone else, but they may have come from a school system that is different from ours," said Lourdes Salazar, president of Eastside Latino Leadership Forum, which helped put on the event.

The conference can help Latino students navigate what they sometimes feel is the "hidden" pathway to college, said Jose Rodriguez, who works in the district's curriculum department and helped with the event. This year, the students helped organized the conference, including helping to choose the keynote speaker and the topics they wanted the conference to cover.

"Part of it is about letting them know that planning for college starts in ninth grade, not your senior year, and once you get into college, how you get the financial help to stay there," Rodriguez said.